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ABSTRACT

A Chicago vocational English language training program (VELT) conducted a needs assessment survey of employers of limited-English-proficient (LEP) workers in assembly, packing, shipping, janitorial and housekeeping, machine operation, and food preparation jobs. The purposes of the survey were to determine: (1) the employers' methods of obtaining job applicants (walk-ins, personal recommendations from staff, social service agency referrals, want ads, school job postings, union pool, and others); (2) employers' criteria for selecting and hiring LEP workers (personal recommendation, previous job application, previous U.S. work experience, native-country work experience, and others); and communication problems on the job (following directions, obeying safety regulations, understanding company policy, relations with other employees, reporting problems on the job, absenteeism/tardiness without notification, and failure to ask if something is not understood). The results were used to identify language competencies needed for obtaining and retaining jobs, to select realistic work situations for contextualizing VELT training, and to focus on areas of communication likely to cause problems in the workplace. The survey questionnaire, findings, and conclusions in each area are presented and discussed. (MSE)

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An Employer Needs Assessment

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English language training programs are effective when they meet the language needs of their student population. For refugee Vocational English Language Training (VELT) programs, the instruction must be directed toward meeting refugees' employment needs. Such needs are best determined by an employer needs assessment.

In 1984, the Project Work English (W.E.)* staff conducted a needs assessment of those employers with limited-English proficient (LEP) workers. The purposes of the survey were to determine: 1) Employers' methods for obtaining job applicants; 2) employers' criteria for selecting and hiring LEP workers; and 3) communication problems on the job. We used the results of this survey to identify language competencies needed for obtaining and retaining jobs, to select realistic work situations for contextualizing our instruction, and to focus on areas of communication that are likely to cause problems in the workplace.

Scope and Process of the Survey

W.E. identified employers for the needs assessment in two ways. First, staff telephoned persons listed in the local Society of Personnel Directors to ask if they employed LEP workers. If they answered yes, we asked if they would complete a written questionnaire. (See page 60.) Second, Project C.A.R.E., an employer outreach and job development project, provided the names of additional employers.

Of the 150 employers who agreed to complete the questionnaire, 52 responded. The respondents varied in terms of type of company, size, ethnic background of LEP workers, types of positions filled by LEPs, and use of bilingual supervisors. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Employer Profile
(Number of Respondents: 52)

Type of Company	
Manufacturers	42%
Food service/production	25%
Hotels	19%
Hospitals	4%
Other	10%
Size of Company	
more than100 employees	74%
26-100 workers	20%
11-25 workers	6%
Ethnic Groups (% of companies with following ethnic groups)	
Hispanics	33%
Eastern Europeans	20%
Indochinese	18%
Middle Easterners	17%
Other	12%
Jobs (% of companies with workers in following work areas)	
janitorial/housekeeping	21%
machine operation	17%
assembly	14%
food preparation	14%
shipping	13%
other	21%
Supervisors	
83% of the companies indicated that some supervisors were bilingual. Of those supervisors, 49% were Hispanic and 19% Polish. The remaining 32% represented a variety of language groups.	

*Project W.E. in Chicago is a VELT program which provides refugees with the language skills to obtain and retain jobs. It serves all refugees. Cambodian, Lao, Ethiopian, Assyrian, and Romanian are its major student groups. Students can attend a level-one survival class and/or a level-two or level-three pre-employment class. Students study 10-12 hours per week (or from four to ten months). Because of its unique program structure and limited time for study, the program has to provide English language skills as expeditiously as possible.

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The results from this employer profile indicate that our students are likely to be employed by large companies with a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual workforce but where English is needed for successful work performance. Because of the variety of jobs held by LEP workers, W.E. incorporated many different examples of work situations into its curriculum and daily language instruction.

Survey Results and Implications

The employers' criteria for the recruitment and selection of the LEP worker, the types of communication problems encountered on the job, and the implications for our curriculum and classroom are summarized below.

1. What are the most important methods for finding job applicants?

Responses to this question are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Methods for Finding Job Applicants
(Number of Respondents: 51)

Sources	
Walk-ins	27%
Personal recommendations from current staff	25%
Social service agency referrals	21%
Want ads	21%
School job postings	2%
Union pool	1%
Other	3%

Twenty-one employers responded when asked to identify the single most important method for finding job applicants; the two most important sources were referrals and recommendations from current employees (28%) and walk-ins (16%).

Implications

- W.E. encourages its students to ask friends, sponsors, and family to tell them about job openings and provide recommendations on their behalf to potential employers. In its ESL instruction, W.E. teaches students the English needed to walk into a company, request information regarding current and future job openings, ask about the procedures for applying, and fill out a job application.
- Want ads are not a vital source of information about job openings, especially for entry-level jobs using unskilled workers. For those students with minimal literacy skills, time is better spent teaching more useful job-seeking strategies, as indicated in Table 2, than teaching the extensive English skills needed to read a want ad.

2. What criteria do employers use in selecting their LEP workers?

We asked employers to identify the importance of the following: the interview, personal recommendations from current employees, job applications, previous work experience in the U.S., and previous work experience in the native country.

Table 3 indicates the importance of the various criteria to specific job areas.

On a follow-up questionnaire, 36% of the respondents ranked previous U.S. work experience as the single most important criterion. The job interview was identified by 28% as the second most important.

Implications

- A VELT program should provide students with supervised work experiences, since many refugees lack any work experience in the U.S. Such an activity can demonstrate to an employer that the refugee has the skills to succeed on the job. Supervised work experience is especially important when the job involves the operation of machines, since this work varies from country to country.
- Students should be aware that some employers may not consider lengthy work experience in their native country important. Gaining work experience through an entry-level job in the U.S. is given more weight than past experience because it demonstrates the ability to function in the U.S. workplace.
- Project W.E. emphasizes those competencies that result in a successful interview, such as the ability to state skills and work experience and to ask questions regarding pay, schedules, and benefits.
- The importance of the job application varies from employer to employer. Some employers consider it important and use it as an assessment of the applicant's level of English; other

Table 3: Criteria for Employee Selection by Job Area
(Number of Respondents: 52)

	Interview	Personal Recommendation	Previous Job Application	Previous U.S. Work Experience	Work Experience Native Country	Other
1. Assembly	38%	0%	5%	33%	5%	19%
2. Packing	33%	0%	5%	29%	0%	33%
3. Shipping	31%	0%	0%	31%	0%	38%
4. Janitorial/ Housekeeping	37%	0%	3%	37%	7%	18%
5. Machine Operation	24%	0%	4%	52%	8%	12%
6. Food Preparation	50%	0%	0%	30%	10%	10%

employers allow applicants to take the application home or to get assistance from another person in filling it out. In our program,we consider it important for more literate students to learn to complete the application form independently. Less literate students should learn to complete the application by copying pertinent information from a model application that is already completed.

3. What communication problems occur on the job?

A variety of communication problems can occur on the job. We asked employers to identify the importance of seven potential problem areas. Table 4 summarizes their responses. (See page 59.)

The responses indicate that there are problems, although to varying degrees. "Following directions" and "Failure to ask when something is not understood" are the problem areas most often cited. These are followed in importance by "Absenteeism/ tardiness without notification," "Obeying safety regulations," and "Inability to report problems on the job." "Understanding company policy" and "Relations with other employees" are important, but to a lesser degree.

Implications

ESL instruction should address the above points. For each problem area, some selected student competencies and class activities are noted below.

- *Following directions:* An important teaching/ learning activity is one in which students follow directions in order to complete a task. Sample tasks which W.E. has incorporated into instruction are: measuring and sorting nails, addressing and stuffing envelopes, and measuring liquids in calibrated containers.
- *Asking for clarification:* A teacher can develop specific listening exercises in which one or several key words are unknown to the students, who must then ask for clarification. Situations which require clarification can also be built into tasks in which students must clarify multiple directions.
- *Reporting absenteeism or tardiness:* Dialogues and role plays are useful in teaching this competency. (Project W.E. has a policy that students, even those at the beginning level, must call in if they will be late or absent.)
- *Obeying safety regulations:* This requires both an understanding of the importance of safety in our culture and an ability to use language related to safety. Examples are: reading safety signs, following regulations for proper dress, requesting safety clothing, and reporting hazards, accidents, and injuries.
- *Reporting problems on the job:* This requires some production and fluency on the part of students; competencies are introduced in simple terms at the lowest level but practiced extensively by higher-level students who are likely to obtain jobs which require greater English fluency and increased responsibility. Competencies are typically practiced in the context of a task which requires students to report supply shortages in order to complete the task.
- *Relations with other employees:* Peer relations are enhanced by the teaching of such social

Table 4: Communication Problems
(Number of Respondents: 48)

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
a) Following directions	9%	37%	39%	15%
b) Obeying safety regulations	18%	37%	41%	4%
c) Understanding company policy	7%	28%	50%	15%
d) Relations with other employees	30%	57%	11%	2%
e) Reporting problems on the job	7%	30%	50%	13%
f) Absenteeism/tardiness without notification	28%	28%	26%	18%
g) Failure to ask if something is not understood	10%	12%	38%	40%

language as greetings/farewells, making invitations, and carrying on a variety of small talk. Understanding the appropriate use of such language is as important as learning the actual language.

- *Understanding company policy:* Company policies include benefits, scheduling, unions, paycheck deductions, and workers' rights and responsibilities. Much of the information is best conveyed and discussed in the student's native language. Language competencies can include requesting information and reporting problems.

The results from our survey have been vital in developing a greater awareness of the language needs of workers in a variety of jobs and in identifying and selecting competencies and priorities in our curriculum and instruction. Additional employer contact and follow-up studies of our students' success after program completion will assist us in refining our curriculum, thereby enabling us to meet our students' needs effectively.

***Lisa Karimer** is the VESL curriculum coordinator for Project OSCAER at Northwest Educational Cooperative. Previously, she worked at Project Work English as a VESL instructor and curriculum designer. She has conducted numerous teacher training workshops on the development of VESL classroom activities. She holds a master's degree in Applied Linguistics from Northeastern Illinois University.*

***Aliza Becker** taught ESL at Project Work English from 1984 to 1985. Currently, she is Job Workshop Specialist for the Women's Employment Resource Center (WERC) of Travelers' and Immigrants' Aid. She leads workshops and writes curriculum for low-income and battered women from a variety of backgrounds.*

***Linda Mrowicki** is the director of Project Work English and program manager of the MELT-TAP Project at Northwest Educational Cooperative. She has conducted a variety of workshops in the areas of employment-focused ESL instruction and workplace literacy.*

QUESTIONNAIRE

EMPLOYMENT OF THE LIMITED ENGLISH SPEAKING

Name of Company:

Please circle the most appropriate response(s):

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Type of Industry

   a. Manufacturing
   b. Hotel
   c. Food production
   d. Hospital
   e. Other _____

2. Number of Staff Employed

   a. 1 – 25
   b. 16 – 100
   c. over 100

3. What Ethnic Groups are employed by your Company?

   a. Indochinese
   b. Hispanic
   c. Middle Eastern
   d. Eastern European
   e. Other _____

4. In which area(s) do your immigrant/refugee employees work?

   a. Assembly
   b. Packing
   c. Shipping
   d. Janitorial/Housekeeping
   e. Machine operation
   f. Food preparation
   g. Other _____

5. Do you have bilingual supervisors? _____ If so, for which group(s)?

   a. Hispanic
   b. Chinese
   c. Polish
   d. Indochinese
   e. Other _____

QUESTIONNAIRE (CONT.)

II. SELECTION PROCESS

6. Where do you find your applicants?

   a. Personal recommendations of present staff.
   b. Responses to want ads
   c. Social agency referrals
   d. Walk-ins
   e. Other _____

Please rate Question 7 on a four-point scale. Circle the extent to which you feel the statement expresses a problem (0 = Not important; 3 = Very important)..

7. What value do you place on the following criteria for employment in an Entry Level Position?

a.	Interview	0	1	2	3
b.	Personal recommendations	0	1	2	3
c.	Accuracy and neatness of job application	0	1	2	3
d.	Previous work experience in the U.S.	0	1	2	3
e.	Previous work experience in the native country	0	1	2	3
f.	Other _____	0	1	2	3

8. Of the criteria in Question 7, which is the most important? a b c d e f

9. Are your job applications filled out on site? Yes No

III. RESULTS

Circle the extent to which you feel the following expresses a problem with immigrant/refugee employees (0 = No problem; 3 = Extremely troublesome)

10. a.	Following directions	0	1	2	3
b.	Obeying safety regulations	0	1	2	3
c.	Ability to understand company policy	0	1	2	3
d.	Relations with other employees	0	1	2	3
e.	Ability to report problems on the job	0	1	2	3
f.	Absenteeism/tardiness without notification	0	1	2	3
g.	Failure to ask when something is not understood	0	1	2	3

The results of this survey will be used to improve the quality of pre-employment training given to refugees. We hope this will ultimately benefit you.

THANK YOU!